A CHRISTMAS EVE SERMON
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Christmas is a great time around here. It begins in September, when the first holiday decorations appear in the store windows along Michigan Avenue. The pace quickens throughout the fall until the weekend before Thanksgiving when the lights come on on all the trees along the Avenue, and there's the big parade, and we get out our electric sheep and stand on the church steps to sing carols. And then there's Advent, and the anticipation and the crowds grow each week.

Finally it is here. It's a great time to be a minister, Christmas is. People are kind and considerate, bring us Starbucks, send great trays of cookies and fudge and peanut brittle to the church office to sustain us for our labors. People offer sympathy that we are working so hard. And some of us are. Donna Gray, our Minister for Children and Families, and our music staff—John Sherer, Thom Gouwens, and Beverly Escuder—have worked overtime to make certain that the children's pageant earlier today and the music last Sunday and this evening are perfect. Tower Brass had a few extra engagements this year, including a road trip to Wauwatosa last Sunday. And the choir has put in extra time getting ready for Christmas Eve.

So has the house staff: a church building as heavily used as this one, every day, all day, is a challenge to keep presentable. You and I may dream of a white Christmas, but for the house staff it is something of a bad dream, if not a nightmare. I am so grateful to Leszek Pytka and his staff, who shovel the walks and mop the floors and prepare for four services this evening and straighten up after we leave. If you don't say anything to anyone else this evening, find a house staff person and say thank you. The support staff has been busy, typing, preparing bulletins; volunteers have been stuffing something like 6,000 candles in the little paper shields. All in all it is a Herculean task—a labor of love to be sure, but getting this place ready for Christmas is a major enterprise. Everyone is working overtime, except me. I have one extra sermon to prepare, but for the rest of it I simply cheer everyone on and get to enjoy it all and bask in the glow of the hard work everybody else is doing. It's no wonder I love it.

Every year when the subject of a Christmas Eve sermon comes up, my closest and wisest advisor says pretty much the same thing: "Don't get fancy. We just want to hear the story and sing the carols and get home at a reasonable hour."

She is not alone in that advice. William Placher, a distinguished scholar and theologian, in his book *Jesus the Savior* wrote:

> When most Christians reflect on God becoming human in Jesus Christ, they don't think about theories of the Incarnation but about the Christmas stories. We may not understand the relationship of the [divine nature to the human nature in the "Christ event"—as the academics call it] but we remember Mary and Joseph and the baby, the shepherds and the wise men." (p. 52)

Francis of Assisi, St. Francis, perhaps understood that best and at Christmas in 1223 created for the first time in history a life-size replica of the baby in the manger in Assisi and invited the people of the neighborhood to come see this representation of the Christmas story (Placher, pp. 52–53).

So instead of learned discourse, we turn to human representation, the nativity, in crèches life-size and tiny, elaborate and simple, in literally hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of places. The custom also occasions some very human behavior. For the past several years, people have been stealing baby Jesus from his manger in public nativity displays. It has happened right here in Chicago, in Daley Plaza, until last year, when they secured him with a metal strap bolted to the ground. The *Tribune* reported that this year, after baby Jesus disappeared from a Nativity scene at a Wellington, Florida, community center, "a GPS device mounted inside the ceramic figurine led sheriff's deputies to an arrest."

And we turn it over to the children, who, in traditional children's pageants, somehow manage to capture the essence and the truth of it all. On successive evenings last week we watched the children's program and pageant at St. James Lutheran School, featuring two Buchanan grandchildren (I'm tempted to say "starring," but it would probably be inappropriate) lighting the candles, reciting, and singing, and the next night at St. Mathias Roman Catholic School, in which two more Buchanan granddaughters sang in the angel choir. The same grandchildren, plus one, were also part of a Presbyterian pageant here at 4:00 this afternoon. Three Christmas pageants in one week may not be a record, but it was at least an ecumenical Christmas marathon and I loved every minute of it.

Once again, the children got it just right—the improbability of it all, the confusion, the chaos of a cow barn, the exuberance of a sky full of angels, the shyness of a young girl, the beautiful humanness.

Martin Luther said that when God wanted to address humankind, God did so in baby talk (see Placher, p. 52). It was Luther who said, "Look upon baby Jesus. All subsequent chatter of learned theologians is but a series of

footnotes on the primal baby talk" (William Willimon, *On a Wild and Windy Mountain*, p. 29).

The great twentieth-century theologian Karl Barth said that when we think about God, "we think of the highest, the absolute, the ultimate, some mysterious abstraction. But the God remembered at Christmas is a God with a name, a God with a human face" (*Deliverance to the Captives*, p. 161).

Why would God choose to do such a thing, come into human history in the birth of a child? The answer is love, of course. When God wanted to tell us how dearly and unconditionally we are loved, God did it in the simplest, clearest, most eloquent way possible, a way no one could miss or misunderstand—through the birth of a baby. When God wanted to touch our hearts and call gratitude and love out of us, God chose the birth of a child.

His mother, Mary, and father, Joseph, set out from Nazareth on the long trek south, to Jerusalem and beyond, to Bethlehem, town of Joseph's birth. She was heavily pregnant. The going was not easy. When finally they arrived, every available place was taken: there was no room in the inn. Instead they settled for the night in the stable out back. They would be out of the weather at least and warm from the animals. During that long night, her labor began, and the child, a son, was born. They wrapped him in the strips of cloth they had brought along for that purpose, and after they each cradled him and she nursed him, they placed him in the cow's feed box, the manger.

And that, Christians believe, is the way God comes among us: in the birth of a child, in the way every one of us was born, in the incredible miracle of human life, in the love of a mother and father, a family, a community. That is how God comes, we believe. He comes in life lived, as that baby, when he became a man, lived his life—with authenticity and courage and selfless love. That is how God comes: when the poor are cared for, the oppressed receive justice, the forgotten and excluded are included, and the lost are welcomed home.

That is how God comes: in love that knows it is better to give than to receive, to forgive rather than hate; in a love more powerful than death; in love, one of his disciples said not long after Jesus died, from which nothing can ever separate us.

And now there is work to do. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in a new book about the Christmas story, write,

> We who have seen the star and heard the angels sing are called to participate in the new birth and new world proclaimed by these stories. The birth stories are not a pipe dream, but a proclamation that what we

> see revealed in Jesus is the way—the way to a different kind of life and a different future. . . . God will not change the world without our participation. (*The First Christmas*, p. 242)

The late Howard Thurman, African American scholar, minister, poet, called it the "Work of Christmas":

> When the song of the angels is stilled,
> When the star in the sky is gone,
> When the kings and princes are home,
> When the shepherds are back with their flock,
> The work of Christmas begins:
> To find the lost,
> To heal the broken,
> To feed the hungry,
> To release the prisoner,
> To rebuild the nations,
> To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
> To make music in the heart.
> (*The Mood of Christmas*, p. 23)

When the child was born in Bethlehem, a light appeared in human history. As the prophet put it, "The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light."

We know what that means—to sit in darkness:

> . . . an ongoing war and deteriorating conditions in Afghanistan; American service men and women, Iraqi and Afghan civilians, children, dying
>
> . . . chaos, anarchy, starvation, and disease, which we seem powerless to do anything about, in Africa
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> . . . an economy that has seemed to collapse in front of our eyes. In a staff meeting last week, we were talking about the economy and the implications and impact it has on giving and the church budget. The director of our Day School, Ruthie Hornaday, reported that one of her students, five-year-old Alex, announced one morning, "My dad says this economy is bad." "Yes," Ruthie said. "And," Alex continued, "it's going to be real bad for a long time." "How long?" Ruthie asked. "Two days," Alex answered.

Well, it is bad, and it will be for more than two days. Hard-earned savings, investments in the future, retirement and education funds, jobs, pensions, benefits are gone. We are sitting in a kind of darkness this evening.

And every one of us is familiar with the darkness of personal loss and grief: the loss of a parent, a child, a beloved, a colleague and dear friend—loss intensified by this season.

The religion of Christmas is that

> Christmas faith does not deny the darkness but chooses not to live in it. People of Christmas faith claim that the light that shines in the darkness can be trusted more than the darkness itself and that a little bit of light can dispel a lot of darkness. (source unknown)

And so, whatever the darkness is for you this evening, please know that there is light: a small, fragile light to be sure, but light that will not be overcome—ever; light that will dispel darkness, like the light of the small candles we will hold; the light of the love of God, the light of the world.

> Long ago,
> In the dark night, in a stable behind a crowded inn, a child was born.
> In him was life—
> And the life was the light of all people.

Thanks be to God.